

Excerpts from

GLASS WALLS

A case study involving public policy decision-making

By Kurt Johnson, Sr.

From Page ii:

There also is an important connection between a certain theological viewpoint which embraces what is called a “public square” theology and the implementation of neoconservatism. This connection, and the manner in which this specific theological approach drives the neoconservative ethos, is a major subject in this book which is evaluated in the context of an interesting case study involving Williamson County, Texas.

From Page 2:

While the introduction of the terms neoconservatives and neocons at this point in the book suggests that such terms should be defined, the concept of neoconservatism is sufficiently complex that such a definition would be arduous, in the same way that defining conservatism or liberalism would be arduous. It is sufficient to say now that, for purposes of understanding a definition of neoconservatism, William Kristol, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Benne, Richard John Neuhaus, William Bennett and a long list of others represent neoconservative viewpoints, though some may object to being linked with certain aspects of those viewpoints, and some would be more intensively neoconservative than others. However, neoconservatism can be illustrated by these examples: Wolfowitz’s position on the Iraq war, the position of Neuhaus and Benne on public square theology, and Kristol’s position on just about anything.

From Page 84

Williamson County, Texas previously was referenced as an example of how a public policy intersects with moral considerations involving “market arrangements” in the instance of the controversial management practices associated with a local, government-owned landfill run by a private contractor. While the moral compromises of the “market arrangements” involving the county-owned landfill and the subsidies given to a private company provide a well-understood example because of the substantial documentation which is available, another issue involving a gripping story about real people and their victimization also provides a smaller universe to illustrate a point involving the manner in which civil religion practitioners deal with issues involving significant moral choice.

From Page 97

The problem with this neoconservative approach at the local level is that it generated controversial policies and decisions opposed by the public, but even more problematical was the fact that it functioned [through the five-member (Williamson County) commissioners court] in an oligarchical manner. Observers who watched the court—especially during the period 2000-2009—concluded that the confidence these elected officials had in the Republican Party's ability to deliver votes provided election insulation against a grass-roots or populist uprising. If the party could deliver the votes, there really was no need worrying about the criticisms or objections of the average citizens. Straight-ticket voting alone could deliver the necessary numbers, especially in the fast-growing areas where bedroom suburbs of Republican enclaves were replacing rural settings.

From Page 100

A typical (Pct. 1 Commissioner Lisa) Birkman methodology involves the art of characterizing her responses to input by claiming that thousands of e-mails and phone calls have been provided responses, when in fact, those responses typically are merely perfunctory and fail to reflect substantive dialogue or an intellectual assessment of the issue at hand. However, as long as there are enough Republicans for the straight-ticket lever-pull at election time, form and show rather than substance can be expected to be enough.

From Page 112

The county judge, a member of the Baptist church, stuck to his "moral fiber" position despite substantial criticisms from many citizens, some of whom were also dedicated, practicing Baptists. Those who disagreed with the judge proposed a compelling moral argument of their own—that the continuation of the bad contract constituted a bad or immoral public policy because it allowed an inappropriate benefit for a private company through the use of a public asset—the landfill owned by the county.

From Pages 116-117

In the initial weeks following approval of the (landfill) contract on March 3, citizens from the Hutto area (and especially those living near the landfill) invited Pct. 4 Commissioner Ron Morrison to a series of public meetings to explain the new contract and the consequences of its implementation—especially since he had voted for it and the landfill is in the heart of the county precinct he represents. As of late March, he continued to decline the invitations for public discussion and limited his participation to a private meeting with citizens in his office. What he would say in public was not a specific defense of the contract or its contents but rather the excuse that "well-paid attorneys" working for the county advised him to vote in favor of the contract. Citizens were aghast at that justification for supporting such a bad deal for the county and its taxpayers. Since when do lawyers make policy? Since when do lawyers tell their clients what to do? As one citizen stated, if lawyers are going to be the

ones making these decisions, then they should be the elected officials sitting on the dais at meetings of commissioners court. Citizens also observed that one of the likely reasons that Morrison didn't want to address the specific details of the approved contract in public, especially in answering questions, is that he didn't (and still doesn't) understand them fully. There's likely more than just a grain of truth to that observation, and Morrison never has provided any evidence to the contrary.

From Pages 164-165

... the TFDP (Texas Fair Defense Project) charged that Williamson County violated the rights of the several defendants named in the lawsuit by (1) deliberately failing to inform them of their right to counsel, (2) providing inaccurate information to defendants about their ability to qualify for appointed counsel, and (3) failing to provide counsel to indigent defendants who have requested appointed counsel.

From Pages 138-139

Without citing any real basis for imprisoning immigrant families who are lesser threats to society than many of the real criminals in the county who are out on parole, Precinct 2 Commissioner Cynthia Long and Precinct 3 Commissioner Valerie Covey stated from the commissioners court dais that they viewed the situation as acceptable because those locked up actually lived under better conditions than they had experienced wherever they may have been previously. Long also offered the opinion stating that the parents incarcerated there are lawbreakers, and unfortunately sometimes children have to suffer with the sins of their parents. Morrison stated his agreement with that concept and also offered the rationalization that the prison jobs made available in the economically challenged community of Taylor have a value that somehow justifies the program.

From Pages 267-268

But there's a subtle dimension of Rawls' understanding of "utilitarianism" which both Rawls and Benne appear to miss. As defined above, "utilitarianism" is essentially a political statement, namely the "greatest satisfaction of the greatest number" which translates into votes and into election victories.

While this application of what might be called "rough democracy" appears to have a value, the basic question which emerges asks whether injustice results from this process. And, if it does, what can be done about it? In addition, the achievement of this "greatest satisfaction of the greatest number" opens an entirely new can of worms related to the corruptive nature of the political process itself, with ad agencies, spin doctors and public posturing (even to the point of putting revisionist history into sound bytes) creating a distorted picture of "the greatest number" being satisfied because their ideas are being implemented.

In the case of Williamson County politics, the ability of a relatively small group (in contrast to the broader base of an entire electorate) to use political party structures for making and implementing public policy even distorts utilitarianism the way Rawls has defined it.

But an even greater problem for the implementation of utilitarianism is that regardless of whether it appropriately reflects the notion of the “greatest satisfaction of the greater number” or, in the alternative, the perception of implementing that notion, even that concept is corrupted by the methods of the power brokers. Injustice can be injected into a culture or subculture without a true debate on the merits, and the injustice can be perpetuated by remaining unchecked because of the appearance that utilitarianism has been attained.

Given these problems, is there any wonder that the families imprisoned at T. Don Hutto, and especially the children who have committed no crimes, are nonetheless viewed as criminals (as per the statement made by County Judge Gattis in the documentary, The Least of These)? And it therefore should come as no surprise that the only remaining redoubt behind which public officials can hide is in stating that “children must suffer because of the sins of their parents.”